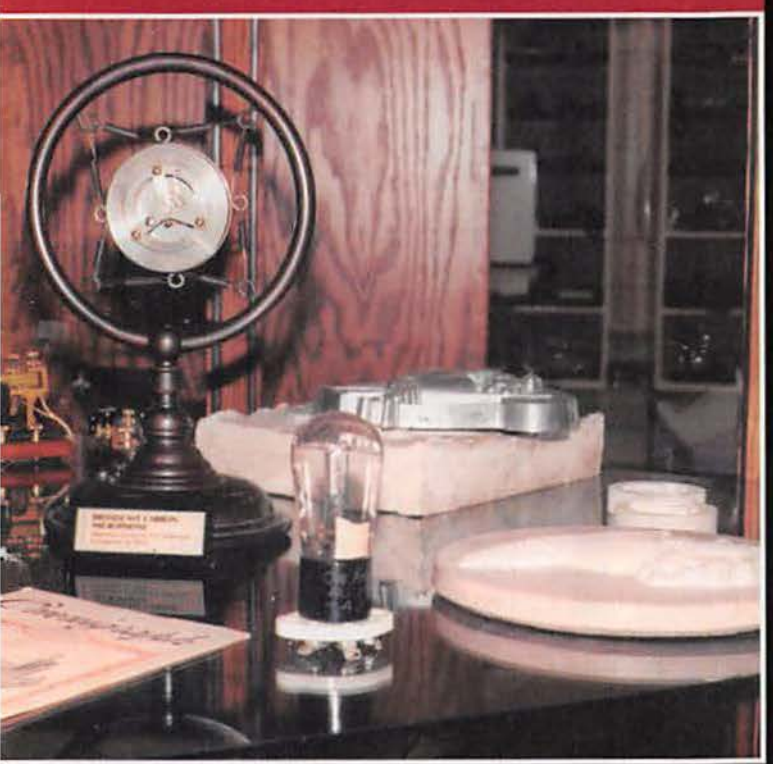
80

The portrait at left was presented to Edgar Johnson at a 1973 E.F. Johnson Board of Directors meeting as a gift from the employees "to the man who gave his name to our company" during the 50th anniversary of the companies founding. The artist was Richard Lack of Minnetonka, Minn. Artifacts of American radio history (right) are on display at the EFJohnson Operartions Center Museum in Waseca as is the portrait.

Years with E F Johnson

Small town Midwestern values and the radio company that rode the historical waves of the 20th century

by Bill McCarthy



Denny Blaine points to seams in the corridors while providing a tour of the EFJohnson plant and headquarters in Waseca, Minnesota. He drives around the outside and points out all the additions and changes in the building that has been home of the radio company since Dwight Eisenhower was president of the nation.

Other businesses share the building these days, Blaine, executive vice president of sales and marketing, explains. At one time the E.F. Johnson Co. needed space for manufacturing each and every part of its products and even a print shop for the company's product catalogs.

Inside, Ken Wasko, executive vice president of operation/engineering, discusses how the plant can be quickly adjusted for efficiency and retooled for new products, testing areas can be efficiently brought up and down rapidly, all in a place that is just a fraction of the overall building.

Technology and markets have changed, Blaine says in obvious understatement. During the late 1950s, the current Operations Center was built on Johnson Avenue and the street was named after founder Edgar F. Johnson, but the building only tells half the story of the 80-year-old company.

The plant's museum — filled with devices and the simplest ceramic parts that made an economic difference in the

Edgar and Ethel Johnson in the twenties.

In a sense, this place represents a cultural center of small town American life.

The Johnsons in the eighties.

life of the company — makes it clear how many technologies have come and gone in the radio world and have been developed and refined, disbanded and replaced. It is a technology monument that is gripping and nostalgic.

The museum is a reflection of the history of not only a company and American radio technology, but also of American culture and the waves history from outside, such as World War II, the love of the automobile and being able communicate on the open road in the 1960s and now the terrorist threat.

While the technology is fascinating — at least to a communications geek — one can't help but wonder about all the people who have passed through this place in their working lives. What was the chatter like as people arrived for work or took their coffee breaks through the 1950s, '60s and '70s on up until today? In a sense, this place represents a cultural center of small town American life.

There is a feeling of interdependence between the rural agriculture community and the company that is missing between the industrial and office parks and suburbs that sprawl around them in so much of modern America. There's a feeling of shared values that is difficult to find in the urban work world.

More than just a business

The feeling raises the question: Could someone like Edgar F. Johnson build a company with that type of atmosphere today? That has to be a question as EFJohnson Co. celebrates 80 years of existence this month.

Johnson loved symmetry. That is apparent in the plant and apparent in his life. He founded the company Oct. 10, 1923; he retired from its board of directors Oct. 10, 1983, though he was far from done. He continued his philanthropic work with a special emphasis on promoting education until his death. The founder and former president and chairman of E.F. Johnson Co., now EFJohnson, died of cancer Feb. 11, 1991, at age 91 at his home on Clear

Lake in the town he loved — Waseca, nearly 80 miles south of Minneapolis.

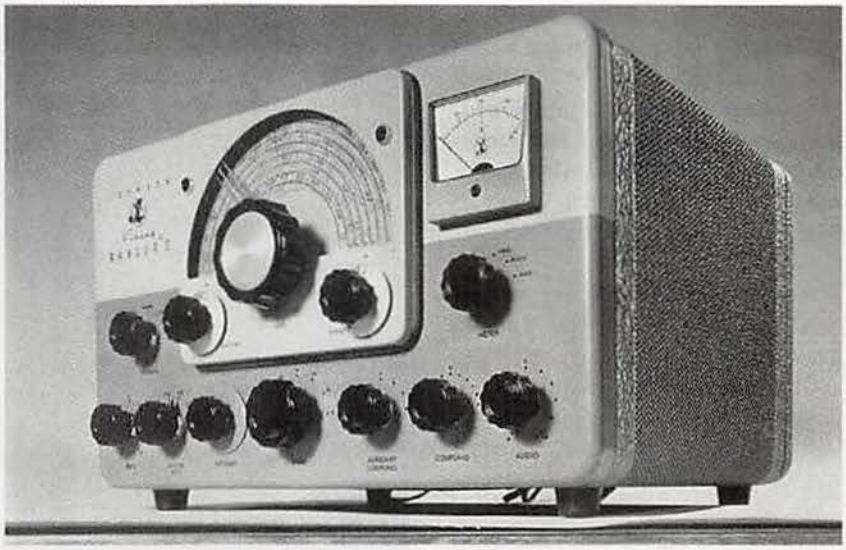
His wife of 67 years, Ethel, died two days later on her 96th birthday. It's a love story that seems so distant and too simple in the cynical, divorce-ridden 21st century.

On St. Valentine's Day in 1991, there was a double funeral service for Edgar and Ethel at the First Congregational Church in Waseca.

"My mother was always there in the background," said daughter Lois Chaffin. "He always knew she had his support."

Johnson dedicated his life to his religion, wife, children — Shirley and Lois and their families — and community with values that may seem out of date.

Yet his life and the life of his radio company, is a window on the history and values of the Midwestern community, that even today has the look and feel of a simpler time.

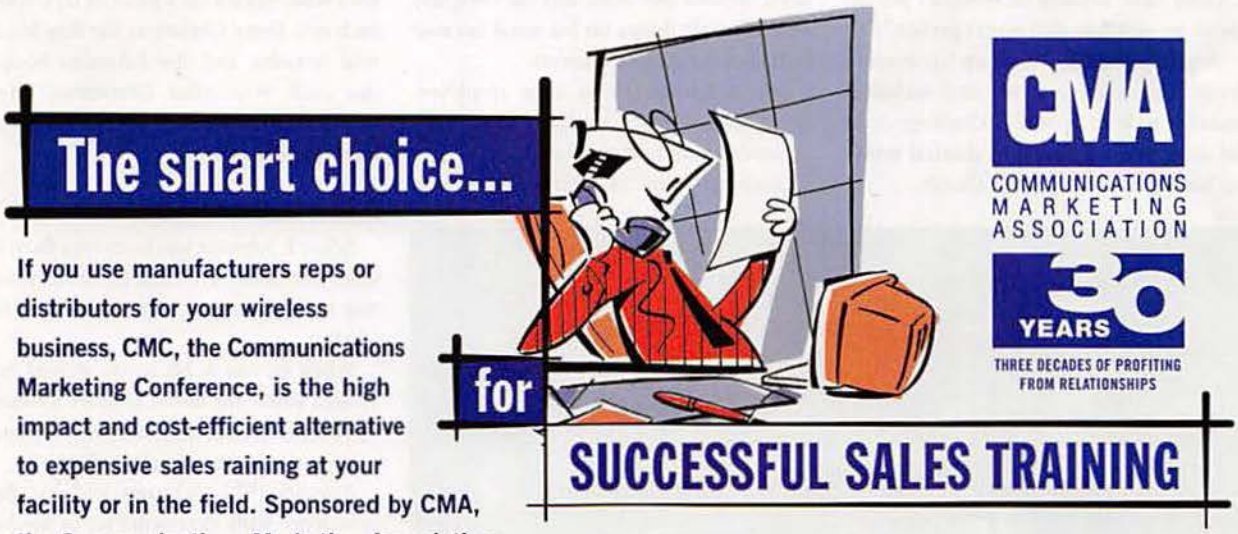


The Viking Ranger II

"It has always been a major objective of the company to so manage our affairs as to bring credit and progress and prosperity to our home community," Johnson wrote on the 50th anniversary of the company.

And Johnson provided opportunities that otherwise would not have been available.

"I just think I was really lucky," said 40-year employee Kay Sammon, who started in the payroll department in 1963. "Back then there just weren't that many oppor-



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tunities for women in small towns who were pretty good with math and went to business college."

She added that the company has always had a sense of mission, and with the new emphasis on homeland security, Project 25 and interoperability for public safety communications, "we are in the business of saving lives."

Hank Olson, production manager and a 38-year employee, said of Edgar, "I think he knew everybody."

Olson said when Johnson turned 80, he visited the plant and came up to him and said, "'Thank you Hank.' Even though he had been retired for years, he never forgot a face."

Johnson was known as a perfectionist, yet he was fair to employees.

Olson remembers when the plant first had an air conditioner installed on the roof of the plant. Johnson surveyed it from the ground and from the roof, then reported that the air conditioner was not square on the roof.

It was made square.

He worked so hard, daughter Lois Chaffin said, "because he wouldn't put his name on anything that wasn't perfect."

And he would often stay up late reading trade magazines, journals and technical manuals to keep up with technology or in his study while listening to classical music on Sunday afternoons after church.

The Transcom

Though he dedicated at least 16 hours a day to work, Lois said he was home for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"We ate together as a family," she said.

"He was always there," she added and it never seemed like work and the company were the only things on his mind because he had many outside interests.

Son-in-law and long time employee, Bob Chaffin said, "if he didn't have a tool he needed he would make it."

Nothing went to waste either, Bob Chaffin said. Edgar Johnson would keep things all kinds of parts and pieces in his home shop organized with the gauge clearly marked. On the back of his workbench were neatly coiled rolls of steel wire with sizes written on a piece of tape above each roll. Every Christmas the Boy Scouts sold wreaths, and the Johnsons bought one each year. After Christmas, Edgar would take the wire off the wreath before throwing it away.

The Messenger III

A Midwestern rural life

Edgar F. Johnson was born on a farm six miles southeast of Waseca in Otisco township in 1899, the year Marconi invented the wireless.

When he was 4, his family moved into Waseca where his father, Charles Johnson, was a homebuilder and later owned a hardware store and woodworking shop.

Around 1912, Johnson had his first experience with electronics when his half brother, Charlie Nelson, strung lines between two neighborhood houses for Morse telegraphy. That experience and additional exposure to radio in high school led to Edgar's decision to attend the University of Minnesota, where he earned a degree in electrical engineering in 1921.

During Christmas break in 1920, he brought home a single-tube regenerative receiver he built in the electrical engi-

Around 1912, Johnson had his first experience with electronics when his half brother, Charlie Nelson, strung lines between two neighborhood houses for Morse telegraphy.

neering lab at school.

"Folks in Waseca heard for the first time, with earphones, pioneer radio station KDKA and very few others then existing. The local paper observed that perhaps the university was doing all right for me," he said upon receiving the University of Minnesota Outstanding Achievement Award in 1977.

The award is the highest honor the Board of Regents bestows on a select few alumnus.

As a student at the university, Edgar met his wife, Ethel Jones, who came to Minnesota from California to pursue a degree in education. Before their marriage, Ethel taught school at Wishek, North Dakota, and worked in social services at the University of Minnesota.

The Johnsons married July 28, 1923, in Claremont, California, but made their home in Waseca.

On Oct. 10, 1923, with assets of $1,694.65 — mostly in inventory of parts used for homebuilders of radio broadcast receivers — the newlyweds went into business, said Edgar in retelling the founding on the 50th anniversary of the company.

His father gave him a bit of space rent free in his woodworking shop located in an old wooden building in downtown Waseca. Their office was "under the bed," where a borrowed typewriter and other supplies had to be stored when not in use. When things were slow with the start-up, he helped his father with construction.

When their two daughters, Shirley and Lois, came along, they opened their first shop in another small frame building in downtown Waseca.

The Johnsons started with mail order. The original focus of the company was retail sales of component radio parts to broadcast stations, amateur or ham radio operators, and broadcast listeners.

During the 1924 World Series, Edgar broadcast the game to Waseca residents by loudspeaker in front of the store. Few people had radio receivers in those days.

In 1925, Edgar's brother, Marvin, joined the business, and another brother, Everett, became a partner in 1940. Marvin's wife, Mildred, and Everett's wife, Ruth, also worked in the business. It became a six-way family partnership, but all the old timers

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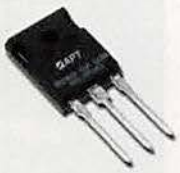

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believe the business would not have lasted without Edgar as the driving force.

Technology spurred growth

In the fall of 1936, E.F. Johnson Co. built its first factory and office building of 8,000 square feet. Seventeen people were employed at the facility. The components designed and produced there were eventually needed in volume for World War II. Before the war ended in 1945, E.F. Johnson Co. had grown to 500 employees with expanded facilities in a garage, a nearby grocery store and the Odd Fellows Hall.

The original focus of the company was retail sales of component radio parts to broadcast stations, amateur or ham radio operators, and broadcast listeners.

As the business grew, the company began to sell kits to ham radio operators, so they could build their own radios. When customers began to ask for assembled radios, employees took the kits home and assembled them for extra money. In 1949, the first complete amateur radio transmitters were manufactured at E.F. Johnson Co. on an assembly line.

Johnson was first in the production of these transmitters because of their extensive experience during the war. The Viking I transmitter followed and was an immediate success.

In 1958, the Class D Citizens Band (CB) Radio, appeared on the market. The development brought personal radio communication to millions of people and onto the highways as Americans embraced the automobile like never before.

With Edgar at the helm, E.F. Johnson Co. dominated that market with products sold under the trade name *Messenger* from 1959 to 1976. The *Messenger* is exhibited in the Smithsonian Institute, indicating its technological and cultural significance in American society and history.

When the popularity of CB radios diminished, production of cellular mobile telephones began, and in 1982, the company merged with Western Union.

Johnson had resisted mergers for many years. Lois Chaffin said he personally and formally denied each offer in letters he wrote himself.

"None have ever been even considered," Johnson told stockholders at a meeting to approve the merger. "We wanted to do it our way. But the situation has changed. Cellular radio, where we are already in the

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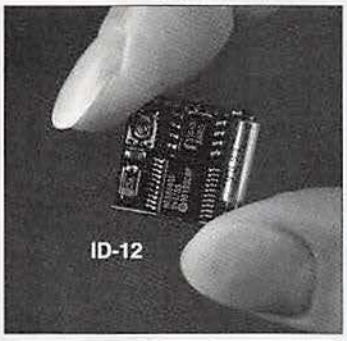

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"Perhaps I was the last of our directors to agree, like a doting father contemplating a potential son-in-law, but I am convinced it is a good union," Johnson said.

The company would keep its name and independence in management, policies and employees.

Western Union had been in decline between 1920 and 1960 because of its reliance on the telegraph as its core product but began to revitalize with microwave networks and satellite integration, offering telex as communications for business, Robert M. Flanagan, chairman, president and CEO of Western Union told the same group.

One hundred and ten years after its first opportunity, it finally dawned on Western Union that there were opportunities in telephone systems.

Flanagan said, "This is a vast growing market in which Western Union has never been a factor since it turned down the first patents back in the 1870s with the comment, 'it would never succeed.' We changed our minds."

At that time, Edgar retired from his role as chairman but continued as a board member until 1983. Western Union later sold the company to DEI Corp.

Edgar was active in professional organizations, including the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers and the Radio Club of America. In 1975, he received the Sarnoff Citation from the Radio Club for his contribution to electronic communications.

Also during that year, he traveled with a delegation of major United States manufacturers of communications equipment to China.

This was the time when U.S. President Richard Nixon "opened" China. The United States had isolated the communist nation and only a fierce communist-hunter such as Nixon could lead the nation to better relations and survive politically while the Cold War continued and the hot war of Vietnam still raged in political debate. Their visit was the first time members of a single industrial group visited the People's Republic, and it was

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Johnson parts played a significant role in Allied communications during World War II.

considered a significant step forward in the promotion of friendly trade relations and the broadening of commercial contacts between the two countries.

Two years later in 1977, Edgar Johnson was given the University of Minnesota's Outstanding Achievement Award. This award is conferred upon graduates of the university who have attained unusual distinction in their chosen field, profession or in public service.

Edgar and Ethel Johnson were leaders in the Waseca community and the state of Minnesota.

Edgar Johnson served on the Waseca school board for 18 years, was a member of the Waseca Charter Commission and the Waseca Chamber of Commerce, a trustee of Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, and a trustee for the Courage Center Foundation in Golden Valley. The Johnsons established a professorship in the

Denny Blaine in the EF Johnson museum

Fine Arts department at Gustavus, the first endowed chair in the college's history.

On the deaths of Edgar and Ethel, Dr. John Kendall, Gustavus president, said: "We share the sense of loss that people in Waseca feel. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of Edgar and Ethel Johnson to Gustavus. They were among the major builders of this college. They were not only major financial supporters, but they supported it with their own lives and own commitment."

Edgar and Ethel's daughter and son-in-law Lois and Bob Chaffin

Of loyalty and community

Additionally, Edgar was a member of the American Legion, Lions' Club, Lakeside Club, Masonic Lodge, Minneapolis Club and Minnesota Alumni Association.

During World War II, Ethel was instrumental in organizing the Red Cross in Waseca County. Members of the First Congregational Church in Waseca, Edgar served as a trustee for 15 years and Ethel was superintendent of Sunday School.

They filled their retirement with activities in Farm America, state and local historical societies, and the many institutions that they supported.

Edgar and Ethel dedicated time and money to Operation Bootstrap Africa, a Christian nonprofit based in Minnesota that promotes education in Africa. In 1977, they were the senior members of the group, "but never lacked for energy."

Edagar was known as a taskmaster who

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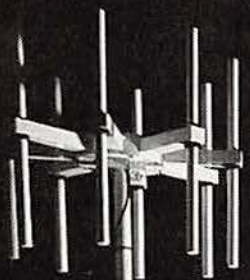

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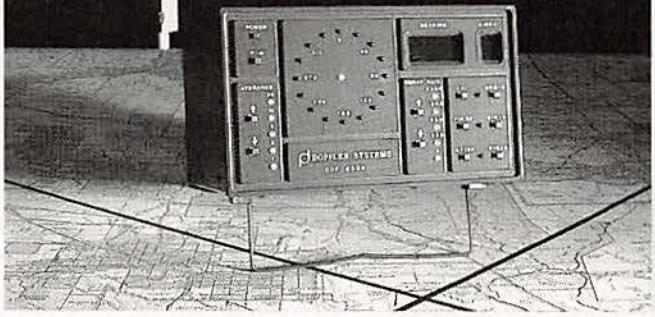

The EF Johnson Operations Center in 1985 shows the additions that reflect changes in the company. Today, more changes are in evidence.

was always on time for the board meetings and making certain the organization and the board was fiscally responsible to donors while setting examples for his colleagues through such things as his promptness.

Johnson believed in steady, measured growth as part of his concern for employees.

In 1953, Edgar walked into the machine shop, approached a machinist and said, "We are going to start a new program called profit sharing, and I would like you to be on a committee to discuss how we should start it out."

The employee was concerned that he was all greasy from working on the machines. He told Edgar that he should find someone from the office who knew something about profit sharing to be on the committee rather than him.

Edgar replied, "You know just as much about this as anyone else does."

The group created the program, however, and E.F. Johnson was one of the first companies in Minnesota to provide profit sharing.

Production Manager Olson explained that Edgar Johnson and his brothers were generous with healthcare and other benefits as well.

"They weren't greedy. They wanted to share with their people," Olson said.

"He had tremendous respect from his employees," Bob Chaffin said, "and they had tremendous respect for him."

Not only was the company one of the first to start a profit sharing plan in the 1950s, but also to provide pregnancy leave for women and a retirement plan.

"He was a very forward-looking person," Chaffin said.

Those programs not only helped employees, but helped management mollify any interest in labor unions.

"He always had the attitude you don't work for me; you work with me." Chaffin said. "If you could get a job with the company, you had it until you retired."

In 1991, The Radio Club of America renamed is annual Pioneer Citation Award the Edgar F. Johnson Pioneer Citation Award. The award is given to long-time members who have contributed to the success and development of the club or to radio communications — something that might embarrass Johnson today.

"He was modest, almost to a fault," said Bob Chafffin. "If he had been more flamboyant he might have brought more attention to the company."

But Johnson's individual fame and fortune was not what the company was about.

Lois Chaffin said: "He loved the community and wanted to keep it in the community."

Edgar Johnson said in the 1980s that part of his inspiration for building the company was seeing economic devastation brought when the area's largest employer in the 1920s, a flour mill, shut down.

His employees said, "When Edgar spoke, you could count on what he said."

Lois Chaffin said that when people in the community asked him to do something or employees asked him to do something, "he did it."

Perhaps that was what made the difference between the way business was done then and now. Loyalty and community were paramount. ■